

**MINUTES OF THE LOCAL MEETING OF THE
WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION
May 15, 2007**

The local jurisdiction meeting of the Washington State Transportation Commission was called to order at 9:00 a.m., on Tuesday, May 15, 2007 at the Skamania Conference Center, Adams Conference Room, 1131 SW Skamania Lodge Way, Stevenson, Washington.

Commissioners present at the meeting were: Chair Dick Ford, Dan O'Neal, Ed Barnes, Bob Distler, Elmira Forner, Carol Moser and Dale Stedman.

CHAIRMAN WELCOME AND COMMISSION INTRODUCTIONS

Chairman Ford opened the meeting welcoming presenters and guests and introduced Commissioners.

TRANSPORTATION ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACING LOCAL JURISDICTIONS

Mary Ann Duncan-Cole, City Administrator, City of Stevenson, provided a bit of history and an overview of the City's distinctive qualities. She explained that some of the transportation problems the area is facing today are resulting from the state system taking over SR 14. There have been very few changes to the highway as originally built in 1930. The Columbia River Gorge is the transportation center of the Northwest as well as being a critical element to transportation needs. Millions of tons of cargo travel the river daily by barge and trains carry freight along SR 14 corridor. Other elements of importance in the area are a natural gas line, power lines and fiber optics grids to the I-5 corridor. She explained that 60 percent of Skamania County residents commute out of the area to work traveling SR 14. This highway is a major route for not only freight and commerce to the Pacific Northwest, but also for the day-to-day existence of area residents. With the two-lane highway being a major truck route, cars and trucks compete daily creating an unsafe situation. The community recognizes and values the scenic quality of the gorge. They would like to keep the road following the natural terrain keeping it a two-lane highway, but this has to be balanced with traffic volumes on the highway. There are an increasing number of bicyclists that use SR 14. Most shoulders are narrow and in some locations there are none at all. Recreational demands have increased with scenic area destinations, and one of the biggest problems is that visitors want to stop for views. We need to look at accommodation of tourism. In closing she emphasized that it is a struggle to fund roads and streets without gas taxes. Maybe the first step is to educate the public on the cost for a mile of road.

Chair Ford noted that the Commission is very supportive of bicycle and pedestrian development. The problem is the 18th Amendment states that the gas tax must be spent on roads. There are federal funds for the purpose of lanes for pedestrians and bicyclists for some projects.

Commissioner O'Neal asked if there has been a truck count performed on SR 14. Don Wagner, Regional Administrator, Southwest Region, responded that about 600 trucks

travel the route per day.

Commissioner Stedman explained that he drove over from Spokane using SR 14, noting that a substantial amount of the highway is designated as National Scenic Area. This should qualify it for special funding.

Commissioner Paul Pearce, Chair, Skamania County Commission, responded that there are complicated special requirements that must be met to obtain that type of funding.

Ms. Duncan-Cole agreed that the funding process takes a lot of time and there are no special revenue sources.

Commissioner Barnes commented regarding conflicts between BNSF and Union Pacific Railroads. He suggested that Stampede Pass would be a better alternative for the trains.

County Commissioner Paul Pearce explained that the county is facing a 15 percent cut in federal forest funds, and could literally lose half of its discretionary funds by the end of this year. The County is hoping for a five year reprieve, but the fact is that it will not last forever. With the loss of funds the County must find new ways to generate revenue, possibly tourism. A new park and ride provides transit service and amenities for travelers along the highway. There are several corners along the route where trucks tip over which severely impacts the highway. As far as trucks on the highway there may be a couple of fixes. One is implementing tax equalization within the scenic area that may take federal legislation. We have asked the Legislature for three years in a row that there be no through truck trips. One of the things that has been discussed is a state route from Carson up through, what is called the swift area to the Woodland/Cougar portion of Clark County. This would be great for a state route.

Chair Ford expressed interest in the loss of federal forest funds.

Mr. Pearce explained that after Mount Saint Helens erupted in 1980 both the county and the schools received timber dollars from the downed timber that was being removed. When timber production ceased because of the spotted owl in the 1990's the federal government paid the county not to cut timber, but those funds expired in 2003. In 1999 they passed the Secure Rural Schools and Counties Act, which looked at National Forest timber production over a ten-year period between 1986 and 1996. They took the three highest timber production years and averaged that to a payment. The Act has run out and the harvest of timber is not at the levels expected, so what we are asking congress is until the harvest numbers increase they find another funding method. Because of the amount of National Forest land in the county only about two percent of the land is available for taxation.

Commissioner Forner shared that she is not convinced that the RTPOs are supported adequately by the state in obtaining funding for rural projects.

Mr. Pearce and Ms. Duncan-Cole responded that the local RTC and RTPO work together cooperatively to accomplish projects throughout the region.

Commissioner O'Neal expressed that he finds tax equalization an interesting concept. The Commission's Rail Study found that a lot of communities are experiencing difficulty in

communicating with the railroads. As a result of the study the Department of Transportation now has a new Rail Office to work with communities and the railroads.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Dean Lookingbill, Transportation Director and Dale Robins, Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (SWRTC). Mr. Lookingbill provided an overview of the Regional Transportation Council's structure and mission. He shared his perspective on major transportation challenges in the area. Safety is the first most important issue with the second being funding. The Nickel Package primarily focuses on urban areas and their transportation issues. Many of the projects within Skamania and Klickitat Counties are more programmatic, such as safety and preservation. These types of requests are difficult to get through the legislative process. The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Act controls where economic development can occur, and there is not much of an opportunity to tap into revenue generated by tourism. SR 14 is drawing tourism that benefits the state. He asked if there is a way that the state can sort of take over the role of the federal government with special funding needs.

Commissioner Distler explained that at one time the Legislature was willing to allow the Department to take a more system-wide approach to the allocation of funds to specific projects. The Legislature has since decided to change to a project oriented funding approach.

Mr. Robins explained how the RTC works with the local agencies. The RTC has developed regional transportation plans for each of the counties that identify solutions to plan certification. Unlike other parts of the state where congestion is an issue here issues are safety, economic development and maintaining the current highway. As previously mentioned the Columbia Gorge is an important transportation corridor. SR 14 on the Washington side and I 84 on the Oregon side and the Columbia River itself moves a lot of goods up and down the river east/west, also in this region we have SR 97 route which is important north/south that moves all the way from Canada to Mexico. These corridors are the backbone to the regional transportation system. The complicated issue is that the region is in the scenic area for most of the projects in the two counties. This adds a new layer of additional requirements to transportation projects.

STATE TRANSPORTATION ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Don Wagner, Regional Administrator, Southwest Region, WSDOT, shared that the Department is working closely with the Columbia River Gorge Commission on a master plan for the gorge. The primary focus of the plan is safety and preservation with a few modernization improvements included. There are about 30 identified major rock fall areas on the highway. Rock fall stabilization will take place a couple of times a year to address twenty eight of the identified safety concerns. He provided an overview of projects currently underway within the region and highlights on the status of the Columbia River Crossing Project.

COLUMBIA RIVER FREIGHT SYSTEM

Professor Ken Casavant, SFTA Principal Investigator, Washington State University, emphasized that the Columbia River Basin has dams on it owned by the Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation and others. Dams have various functions from power generation, irrigation, navigation (barges ect.), and recreation/tourism. Today's presentation relates specifically to barge navigation. The Columbia and Snake Rivers serve both complementary and competitive roles in transportation for truck and rail barge. Shipping by barge provides lower rates and better service to shippers, but lessens services provided by local railroads. He provided a comparison of barge, truck and train movement upbound and downbound the river indicating the tonnage of wheat and other commodities along with the associated cost differences based on the mode of transportation.

The Columbia and Snake River transportation system has played a important role in developing the agricultural and forest products industries in the Northwest and upper Midwest. These rivers serve as a distribution system for up-river movements, collection and assembly for downriver shipments. This system improves market access and competitiveness for domestic products in international markets. The Corp of Engineers projects are no longer whole heartedly accepted and there is conflict between environment and development. There are continued conflicts regarding subsidies to one mode....barge. A final thought.... our waterway transportation is critical to the total transportation system, but is dependent on that system."

THE FUTURE OF THE HOOD RIVER BRIDGE

Mr. Robins provided an overview of the SR 35/Columbia River Bridge Project (commonly referred to as the Hood River Bridge.) The original bridge was built in 1924 and vertically rebuilt and a lift span added in 1938 to allow for the water level rise from the completion of the Bonneville Dam. The Port of Hood River purchased the bridge in 1950. The bridge has narrow lanes and no bicycle or pedestrian facilities which makes it functionally obsolete. The bridge is experiencing major structural and maintenance issues, as demonstrated by a recent inspection report indicating that millions of dollars of improvement are needed to keep the bridge operational until such time as a new bridge could be constructed. Through a partnership between Washington and Oregon Department of Transportation, Southwest Regional Transportation Council and local government the process for finding a long-term solution to this vital transportation link has begun.

Mayor Brian Prigel, City of Bingen, explained that he represents Klickitat County and local cities on the bridge study. The bridge is unique in that it is owned by the Port of Hood River and therefore is not a part of the normal transportation system. About 15 years ago local residents started moving towards upgrading or replacing the facility. The bridge is a detriment to the local area because of load and width restrictions. Other drawbacks are the increase in traffic resulting from local development. There are also issues with the navigation system. This is a long-term project and the local community wants to keep it moving forward. The local community is willing to pay up to a \$2 toll rate as opposed to the current .75 cent rate on the bridge as long as they are reassured that the tolls would pay for construction bonds.

This toll rate would not be sufficient to pay for the bridge, so additional funds would need to be obtained elsewhere. Mayor Prigel introduced Michael McElwee, Executive Director, Port of Hood River, noting that the Port is working with the local community.

Mr. McElwee shared that the Port of Hood River is committed to a partnership with Washington and Oregon Department of Transportation and the local communities. He noted that there are demographic changes in the area, such as population and traffic growth using the bridge. Not only is tolling an issue, but the width of the bridge and its lack of amenities is an issue. The bridge is subject to high wind loads therefore adding abutments are not feasible. Where there may be pressure to increase the current toll and dedicate it to a reserve fund, there are equal pressures to reduce the toll because the median income in Hood River County and on the Washington side are both low. He noted that it's essential to be mindful of the needs of both counties and their communities. The tolls would have to be extremely high to meet the needs of the funding requirement, so there will be a need to acquire some type of additional funding. The Port as of June will have invested about \$7 million into the bridge on the installation of new decks, a locking system and electronic tolling capability. All in all the bridge is good condition.

Mr. Robbins noted that given the choice it would be interesting to see if citizens would be interested in paying a higher toll for a new bridge or continue using an under performing bridge and pay a lower toll.

Mr. McElwee emphasized that the Port is absolutely committed to working with Washington, Oregon and other partners to meet this challenge.

TRANSPORTATION AND THE GORGE SCENIC AREA

Brian Litt, Planning Manager, Columbia River Gorge Commission, provided an overview on the Gorge Scenic Area, the Gorge Scenic Act and the Gorge Commission and SR 14. He briefly covered the history of the creation of the gorge explaining that it is the only sea-level route from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean through the Cascade Range from Canada to California. The debate over preservation of the Gorge began in the early 1900's and was heavily debated in the 1930's. In 1986 President Regan signed the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act, the first of its kind. The purpose of the Act is to protect and to provide for the enhancement of the scenic, natural, cultural and recreational resources of the Columbia River Gorge. The Act also protects and supports the economy of the Gorge area by encouraging growth to occur in urban areas and by allowing economic development that is consistent with resource protection. Nearly half of the Scenic Area is in private ownership. There are two federal dams, two main rail lines and interstate SR 14 that traverse the Gorge. The Gorge has world class scenery, recreation, natural resources and 13 established towns. It is a vital multimodal transportation corridor of national, regional and local importance. Prior zoning allowed development that threatened special qualities of the Gorge. With the lack of a coordinated regional plan the solution was to create a bi-state regional planning organization comprised of a federal, state and local partnership that has teeth. There are four treaty tribes that plan a unique role. These tribes have treaty rights throughout the entire scenic area.

The Gorge Commission was created by an interstate compact between Oregon and Washington, under authority of federal law. The Commission is comprised of 12 members who are responsible for regional planning and regulation in the scenic area. In 1996 state and local agencies collaborated to develop the SR 14 Corridor Strategy and Action Plan with key goals to improve safety of the highway and enhance the economy of communities. The plan calls for protecting and enhancing resources within the highway corridor, as well as manage it in the most effective and efficient manner possible. Some of the challenges are through-trucks, safety improvements, interstate bridge and managing growth while maintaining safety and rural character and the need for sufficient funding.

WINTER HIGHWAY OPERATIONS IN THE GORGE

Karla Keller, Region 1 Maintenance/Operations Manager, Oregon Department of Transportation and Rick Sjolander, Assistant Regional Administrator, Maintenance/Operations, SW Region, WSDOT, provided an overview of the Snow and Ice Program in Southwest Washington.

Mr. Sjolander highlighted that Washington, Oregon and the State Patrol work closely together to provide information to the public and keep the highways safe. He explained that the Southwest Region and ODOT work closely together to maintain the highways during winter. WSDOT has reduced its use of sand and implemented a program that primarily uses some type of chloride (salt) to control ice and snow to improve highway conditions. Chemical treatments are more effective than sand and help reduce the use of sand which aids in keeping the highways in better condition. WSDOT began using chemical deicers in the 1990's. The program continues to improve each year as new chemicals and new application techniques are introduced, and the Department's experience grows.

Ms. Keller echoed that ODOT and WSDOT have a very good working relationship. She provided an overview of Gorge winter operations.

Ron Rudkie, Assistant District Commander District 5, Washington State Patrol, shared that the WSP provides as much advance information to motorists as possible, but it never seems to be enough.

Commissioners asked questions regarding issues with rail and highway safety standards for trucks that travel SR 14 and I 84.

PUBLIC AND LEGISLATOR COMMENT PERIOD

Paul Locke, citizen, address the Commission with his concerns regarding the lack of funding for bridges.

The Commission meeting adjourned at 5 p.m., on May 15, 2007.

WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

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REEMA GRIFFITH, Executive Director

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